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*A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: Casting the Spotlight on Modern Greek*

*History through Theater*

GONDA VAN STEEN

ABSTRACT: Different students respond to different stimuli. Visual material is highly persuasive in the teacher's aim to have students with varying levels of knowledge respond to seemingly abstract topics such as the public role of theater. A multi-sensory approach helps to push the limits of student knowledge and curiosity beyond ancient Greek history and culture into the similarly rich but lesser-known modern Greek realm. A Socratic teaching style further entices the students to engage with images that present all-new puzzles and that make them unravel the threads of the history of a country both enriched and marred by its many legacies.

The world is like a Mask dancing.

If you want to see it well,

you do not stand in one place.

(Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, 1964)

## I. Objective

Κάτω προγόνων είδωλα, παραμυθιών ινδάλματα,  
παραμερίστε να διαβούν τα ζωντανά τ' αγάλματα

\* \* \*

Χωθήτε μες στους τάφους σας, μη μας κοιταζετ' έτσι,  
και αυτός ο τόπος έγινε της δόξης το κοτέτσι.

(Souris 1971: 2:31)

Down with you semblances of the ancestors, idols made of fairytales,  
Stand aside so that the living sculptures may pass

\* \* \*

Sink back into your tombs and don't look at us like that,  
for this place has become the chicken coop of [ancient] glory.

(Trans. Giannakopoulou 2015: 93)

Thus wrote the Greek satirical author Georgios Souris, pleading with his fellow Athenians of the 1900s to let go of the ghosts of the ancients and at last embrace modernity. This article speaks of the modern ghosts of war, suffering, and displacement, of the very twentieth-century phenomenon of refugees of armed conflict in the eastern Mediterranean. Focusing on the reception of images, it equips instructors with a tool to introduce a (literal and metaphorical) snapshot of modern Greece into the class modules that they keep reserved for classics. Often enough, classicists are faced with students' questions about current events in Greece, the Balkans, and the Middle East, to which they may have no

answer, about which they may have little content and no context to provide. There is safety in staying with strict classics, but personal and intellectual safety from a remote viewing location are hardly satisfactory, when images constantly flood our every big and small screen and while events in Greece, Turkey, or Syria—to name just a few countries—remain in the daily news headlines. Therefore, this article invites teachers as well as students to think of Greece as a modern country with modern problems and challenges, and to relate that knowledge back to antiquity. Specifically, it elicits a recursive reflection on the meaning of images of theater spaces as effective lenses on society. This article also forces a professional and ethical question: where does the study and knowledge of Greek antiquity lead in the context of a refugee problem—that disturbing but quintessential hallmark of the Middle East of the early twentieth and now also of the early twenty-first century? Does our profession need to take on a different, more expansive kind of responsibility, starting in our teaching practice? The author recommends a Socratic-style, deductive approach in reading and teaching the examples in question.

## II. Execution

It is not an easy task to teach subjects such as performance reception, theater's public role, or Greek history (modern as well as ancient) to students who were born in the 1990s, even when or precisely because they constantly relate to moving images of the present day or hour.<sup>1</sup> Classicists may have a slight advantage in that their students may have had some exposure to the Greek myths or the ancient tragedians' best-known plays. But even when Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes have become established names in the classroom, how does one go about teaching the very notion of theater's sociopolitical

meaning and relevance, of the stage world functioning as a mirror of its contemporary surroundings? Can theater that projects ancient myth and classicizing prestige reflect recent history or even history-in-the-making? The students have their doubts—and legitimately so. My response is to adduce a visual example from modern Greek history and, by way of analyzing its content and context, to deliver proof of theater’s important role in twentieth-century public life.

To appeal to my student audience that has very little background in Greek history altogether, I turn to striking but still images. Images speak to our visually oriented students and, I argue, all the more so when these images constitute intriguing puzzles, of the sort that do not readily give up their secrets. The images I place in front of my students are not the typical, photo-shopped “image-bites,” like the ones that online news channels constantly feed to their iPhone-hooked public.<sup>2</sup> They are, rather, older but fascinating black-and-white photographs that require further deciphering. I offer the following example:



I propose an almost Socratic questioning style that drives at the public role of theater, of the stage reflecting the nation's predicament. First, I ask the students to gather in groups and to talk about what they see but also about what they do *not* see. A carefully selected and theater-related image can indeed offer up a rich source of material for examining the historical circumstances that generated it. My deductive approach aims to explore the very interconnectivity of theater and history and to raise pertinent questions about the presence—or absence—of actors and audience members. As a classicist and teacher of modern Greek subject matter as well, I can thus engage students in a more nuanced consideration of theater's position and status in contemporary Greek culture, and to use the stage as a lens on Greek history of the first half of the twentieth century at large.

The students' first reaction to the above picture is typically one of surprise: "This is odd," they say. "It is as if we are the actors who look up to the audience from the stage." "Where are the actors, the members of the audience?" "Is there even a play being produced?" How then do I make them understand that the very absence of play production, of the production of culture, resonated loudly and profoundly with a tragic moment in Greek history?

"If you see with the eyes of an actor," I urge them on, "go right ahead and dare to become the actor and agent who will create meaning out of this seemingly absurd reversal of roles." Indeed, the students' first reaction is not only correct; it has also delivered an ideal vantage point for further discussion. "If we are the actors on the stage, then, haven't we just stopped playing to take a closer look at the performance that is the audience?" "Have we stepped out of our roles to become complicit with the photographer, who seems to be peering into people's private lives?" "Has theater production perhaps stopped altogether?" "But what is happening to this 'audience'?" "What kind of roles are those people playing, when they seem more concerned with their small spaces and their odd medley of personal belongings?" "Why are they not seated in neat rows, wearing proper evening attire?" "For being in a fancy theater, should they not be directing their attention to what is happening on the stage?" "But again, is there even a play going on?" "Something is really 'off,'" the students rightly conclude.

What was it about this time in Greek history that it reversed and subverted the roles of actors and audiences? What was it that made theater perhaps watch history in the making? Inevitably, a student will press me for a necessary historical hook. "What year was this picture taken?" While I try not to overwhelm students with dates, the date of this

photograph is important: 1923. “What happened in Greek history in the early 1920s?” “Is there any direct or indirect connection with the First World War?” At this stage, I send the students back to the drawing board with the question about that year’s significance driving the discussion.

With a few clicks on their phone or computer keyboard, some students manage to pull up more black-and-white images (this time accessing “image-bites” as part of the learning process): poignant stills of crowded boats steering away from the harbor of Smyrna, with the city’s houses and entire quarters burning in the background. “What happened there?” Here, I fill in a few historical facts: Greece joined the Allies or Entente (the winning side of Britain, France, and Russia) by the end of the First World War, after struggling with internal dissension over whether to stay neutral or to commit to active war. With the blessing of the victorious Allies, Greek politicians then revived their irredentist ambitions to reconquer those territories under foreign rule in which “unredeemed” Greek populations still lived. The key proponent of this aggressive policy of the “Great Idea” targeted mainly at the Ottoman Empire was Eleftherios Venizelos (1864-1936), who also led the Greeks’ subsequent expansionist campaigns in Asia Minor, or on the west coast of modern-day Turkey. As early as May 1919, Greek troops landed in Smyrna (Izmir) aspiring to capture not only Ankara but also Constantinople/Istanbul. The Turkish nationalists, under the fierce leadership of Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), regrouped and retaliated: not only did they rout the Greek armies but they also drove the Christian populations out of Asia Minor, thus ending an ethnic Greek presence there that had lasted for centuries. In the panic of combat, loss, and destruction of August-September 1922, the Greek minority of Smyrna fled to the city’s harbor and tried to embark on boats, fleeing to safety by any



possible means. The same held true of Smyrna's Christian Armenians, who had come under Turkish attack as well. After this violent "uprooting" (as the Greeks continue to call it), many of the survivors sought to emigrate to the New World. Others settled as refugees in Greece, in a "home country" that they had, until then, not known very well and with which they shared a religion but not necessarily a language. Within a few months (January 1923), a more "orderly" Population Exchange, based on an agreement between Greece and the nascent republic of modern Turkey, attempted to regulate the flow of ethnic Greeks to Greece and of the Turkish minorities living in Greece to Turkey. The guiding principle of this exchange was the criterion of religion, not that of language or of national self-identification.<sup>3</sup> But the best-laid plans of governments did not alleviate the many hardships with which the "newcomers" were afflicted. Greece in the early 1920s was not even a century old as a nation and it lacked infrastructure and economic resources. Where were all those destitute immigrants supposed to stay? Did they find work? Did they integrate eventually? At this stage, I let the students articulate the answers again.

Soon enough, one of my students will make the critical connection: "Greece of the 1920s could barely handle the influx of immigrants and housing, in particular, was in short supply. The government looked for additional housing sites in the most unlikely places, including ... in the theater!" Yes, the separate compartments of the balcony seating area of the grand neoclassical building of the National Theater of Greece were put to use to house refugee families from Asia Minor. Many of these penniless families had lost one or more male relatives, and the building offered not only shelter but also a form of safety to the large numbers of widowed women and children. The playhouse of the National Theater of Greece is still standing today; in fact, it was restored to operate as a playhouse about a

decade after the “catastrophe,” but few remember its early history and links to the refugee crisis.<sup>4</sup> For one, the theater underwent a few name changes, shifting from Royal Theater to National Theater and back, depending on the relative dominance of royalists and republicans—a pendulum of power gain and loss that determined much of the vicissitudes of Greek politics (and political retaliation) through the interwar period. Furthermore, the Greek National Theater was not a popular but, rather, an elite institution. This theater typically housed productions of ancient drama or of the classics of Western culture, such as Shakespeare and French neoclassical plays. It was a bastion of “high culture,” frequented by a rising bourgeoisie eager to be seen mingling with the upper classes. For these kinds of urban audiences, the National Theater had been pursuing a formal, “signature style” in modern Greek performances of ancient drama, suggesting that these productions, in particular, had to be placed on a par with the Western classics mounted by the prestigious stage companies of western and central Europe. Moreover, ancient Greek tragedy performed by professional Greek actors had to validate the “continuity argument,” to which Greek political and cultural morale tended to return, especially in times of crisis. Thus, the ideals of nation-building, of the continuity of the Greek language and culture, and of consolidating the country’s post-WWI Greekness proved to be essential aspects of the National Theater’s mission.

In line with its high-cultural and nationalist mission of promulgating Greece’s rich cultural heritage that had “survived” through time, the National Theater was known to shun any commitment to the production of modern Greek plays or of more innovative and experimental Western works of more recent decades. Also, it did not at all engage in any kind of national affect for mass audiences. Ironically, then, much as the National Theater

had tried to keep modern Greek life from penetrating its repertoire and its very site, modern Greek life itself was let into the theater's "sacred" space. Rather than interpreting this episode as a crisis of encroachment and danger, I prefer to read it with the students as an example of how a nation's prestigious and even elitist theater might become—unwillingly—entangled with the complex narrative plots of its people and the tragic acts of their precarious fate. Despite the National Theater's lofty aspirations, expressed in its stately architecture that mimicked that of the playhouses of the capitals of western Europe, the image in our photograph does not conjure up a site/sight of national glory, prestige, and pedigree, but one of profound nationwide introspection. It was the kind of introspective process in which Greece tends to engage whenever cultural ambitions have been made subservient to a true sociopolitical emergency (as in the current economic crisis).

Thus, refugee families were assigned the quasi-private space of a theater box on the balconies of Greece's National Theater. They installed themselves as best as they could: this entailed finding a space for the trunk with their few possessions, if they had been able to save any; hanging up their clothes and linens, unfolding their bedding—even extending their tiny spaces by loading a few items onto chairs that they left dangling from the balustrade itself. Meanwhile, the regular seating area in the theater's pit remained covered up, to keep the seats' upholstery from being stained or damaged. The students agree that these arrangements cannot but look rather haphazard, and they express the hope that such conditions did not last too long. "Where did all this leave privacy, hygiene, and so on?," the students ask. "Where did it leave theater production?," I counter. My question seems impertinent to them. "Worry about play performances when so many people have lost everything and have now barely found shelter?!" This is exactly the reaction at which I

have been driving. The Greek government, too, considered theatrical life to be less important than the national emergency, and it planned accordingly, allocating the uncommon space of the grand playhouse to a broader refugee relief plan. This reallocation of physical resources was facilitated, however, by the fact that the National Theater had interrupted its tradition in play production. Actually, it was re-founded only in 1930 and staged its new inaugural production in 1932. Theater had given way to the exigencies of war, discord, lack of resources, or to modern Greek history at large.

Looming crises, however, did not preclude Greek history from becoming somewhat of a theater, a kind of spectacle to behold. The photographer who took our particular picture and whose name remains unknown, has indeed forever captured the image of a nation at its most vulnerable moment—and yet, sadly, still on display. The dramatic setting has turned its popular audiences into an unnamed and unrecognized mass of unwilling performers in another of the nation's tragedies. This unwitting chorus of huddled masses offers a collective performance of socioeconomic upheaval and political flux. The theater has become the nation, and the nation itself a tragic chorus of masses in despair. As pawns in the Realpolitik that continued to afflict Greek history, exacerbated by foreign interference, the poor immigrant players have lost all agency. A people on its knees, they produce an alternative performativity, replete with (Greece's) dirty laundry on display.

At this stage, I introduce the students to a second image, adding the shock of contrast to our collaborative analysis. The picture below of the grand playhouse of Smyrna before the fall is again taken from the theater stage, but this snapshot reveals a conventional audience out for an evening of high-class entertainment and dressed in its best fineries. The worthies of Smyrna have gathered to see a performance of Verdi's opera *Rigoletto* in 1917.

The students come to the spontaneous conclusion that the two pictures might even have some of the same people in them, in circumstances that could not be more different.



The chosen photographs and our classroom analysis generate incentives to ponder performance reception in a far extended definition. The students themselves conclude that theater may become an attendee or eyewitness to a nation in crisis. Specters of current history may pass before—not the audience—but the very stage. This microcosm of the physical stage and of the playhouse as a whole still represents the macrocosm of the country—a country that is being watched as if it were an external stage by powerful foreign states, such as the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. The superpowers were indeed onlookers who followed closely what was happening in the strategically critical eastern Mediterranean, and they kept a close eye on the young Turkish Republic in particular.

In closing, I ask my students which ancient tragedy comes to mind when they look upon the now deciphered but no less poignant first image of loss after hoped-for triumph—which they themselves define as a modern case of hubris. They mention Euripides’ *Trojan Women* and justify their answer by referring to the grief of women, the threat and reality of displacement, and again Greek hubris ...<sup>5</sup> For them, the image has unsettled the idea of the rising Greek nation, of the national agenda of choice and self-determination, and of an outspoken Greek identity with a hint of ethnic superiority. “How?” I ask once more. “By foregrounding vulnerability and subjectivity, by inviting meditation on the notions of social community and national belonging,” is their collectively deduced answer. They also reprise the theme of displacement amid ethnic conflict, with the rest of the world looking upon a theater of war from which it stays safely removed. For the students, theater has reclaimed its public role, which proves to be far more diverse than they had anticipated. Moreover, the students have started to think about still images differently, with greater critical skills and with a new appreciation even for old, black-and-white photography. But most importantly, they relate with a new empathy to the many suffering refugees displaced by current conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean. I end the class with a thought from Meleager, expressed in a distich from a poem preserved in *The Greek Anthology* (7.417). It swiftly returns students to the classics class, while delivering an age-old reminder that life, like an old photograph, is complex and fragile:

εἰ δὲ Σύροζ, τί τὸ θαῦμα; μίαν, ξένε, πατρίδα κόσμον

ναίομεν· ἐν θνατοῦς πάντας ἔτικτε Χάος.

If I am a Syrian, what's the big deal, stranger? One is the global world  
we inhabit and call home: one Chaos has given birth to all of us  
mortals.

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<sup>1</sup> My approach to the visual fragments of modern Greek theater has been influenced most by the work of classicists Eric Csapo 1995 (with William Slater), and 2010; Richard Green 1994 and 1995 (with Eric Handley), Oliver Taplin 1993, 2003, and 2007, focusing on his insightful readings of performance-related depictions on Greek pottery; and Martin Revermann 2006. I refer to these works in the appended list of works cited, which also offers leads to further readings with an emphasis on English-language sources. Recent volumes offer a wide variety of approaches to reception studies, most often in its practical applications though not yet in the classroom practice. See, among several others,



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Bakogianni 2013; Hamilakis 2007; Hardwick and Stray 2008; and Tziovas 2014. Bakogianni, Hamilakis, and Tziovas highlight relations between modern and ancient Greece.

<sup>2</sup> For further reflections on the challenge to engage students in relevant critical thinking beyond the use and consumption of “bite-size” knowledge, see Bakogianni 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Here I also refer the students to the standard, English-language book on modern Greek history, Richard Clogg’s *Concise History of Greece*, now in its third edition (2013, especially pages 91-103). Clogg (2013: 99) provides compelling numbers: “Some 1,100,000 Greeks moved to the kingdom [of Greece], as a consequence of the ‘catastrophe,’ as the Asia Minor disaster came to be known, and of the ensuing exchange. In return some 380,000 Muslims were transferred to Turkey.”

<sup>4</sup> Eleni Bastea’s 2014 chapter may serve as an excellent and highly readable introduction to the housing crisis against the backdrop of Greece’s urban development. See further Kapsalis (2013, in Greek). Georgia Giannakopoulou (2015) paints a detailed picture of the clash between ancient and modern in Athens of the early 1900s.

<sup>5</sup> Anastasia Bakogianni and Paula James highlight the pedagogical value of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* in their contribution to this volume. I thank Bakogianni for her always keen eye to the visual culture of antiquity and for the unwavering devotion she has brought to publication projects that illustrate its richness. The omission of captions to accompany the figures in this article is a deliberate choice on my part. Both figures belong to the public domain.